

OU Mission Explores the Glory and Destruction of European Jewry

This past July, some forty participants of an Orthodox Union (OU) mission to Poland toured the infamous death camps and once-illustrious centers of Torah life. The first of its kind, the week-long mission was modeled after NCSY's highly successful JOLT (Jewish Overseas Leadership Training) summer camp, where young adults volunteer at a day camp for underprivileged Jewish youth as well as relive the destruction of Eastern Europe through a series of life-changing tours.

Targeted initially to parents of teens who took the JOLT trip in years past, the mission attracted a broad cross-section of participants from North America, Israel and as far away as Australia. "For years, we received requests from parents, asking us to arrange a similar experience to the one offered to teens," says OU President Stephen J. Savitsky.

Led by Mr. Savitsky and OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Steven Weil, the mission was timed to coincide with the Nine Days, the traditional days of mourning leading up to the commemoration of the *Churban*, the Destruction of the Temple.

"We relived 600 years of Ashkenazic Jewish history in Poland on the trip and the *mesorah* [tradition] that has shaped and defined the very life breath of Judaism in America and Israel," says Rabbi Weil. "Poland played a central role in the Jewish people's spiritual, religious and intellectual life prior to the Holocaust. The trip enabled us to visualize and re-experience our history."

Scholar-in-residence Rabbi Mordechai Smolarcik, rabbi of Boca Raton Synagogue West in Florida and a former NCSY regional director, also participated in the mission. The trip included visits to Krakow, Lizensk and Lublin. Additionally, the group visited the first Bais Yaakov school and the gravesites of renowned Torah scholars such as Rema, Sefat Emet, Rabbi Chaim Brisker and the Tosafot Yom Tov.



Participants of the OU Nine Days Mission to Poland gather at the location of the infamous Umschlagplatz, where more than 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were taken by cattle car to their death.

All photos, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy of David Frankel.



OU mission participants add soil from Israel to the ashen remains of Holocaust victims at the Birkenau concentration camp.

MISSION TO POLAND: A Journey Deep Within My Soul

By Ariane Schneider

Why did I, a Jew from a family living in Australia for five generations, with no immediate connection to the Holocaust, choose to visit Poland this past summer with the Orthodox Union? The answer to “Why the OU?” is easy. Traveling with a group of forty like-minded individuals for the week-long mission—people who know what *kashrut* is and who value its observance, people who appreciate exploring pre-War Jewish Europe from an authentic Jewish perspective—seemed an ideal way to fulfill my long-held goal of taking an educational trip to Poland. The answers to “Why Poland?” are many and varied.

I have long felt that a trip through Poland is an almost obligatory part of a complete Jewish education. Moreover, I believe that as the survivors pass away, I and my descendants are obliged to bear witness. To be able to do so with conviction, I must first see the places where our ancestors lived, prospered and developed vibrant and dynamic communities; I must see where they subsequently suffered and perished because of a society that had turned its back both on its fellow man and on God.

As a teacher of the Holocaust at a large Jewish day school in Sydney and a leader of a seminar preparing sixteen-year-old Jewish kids for a trip to Poland, I have studied the Holocaust both formally and informally. But until I actually visited Poland, my own Holocaust education was incomplete. I wanted to go on this trip to more fully prepare myself to teach my students.

Additionally, my oldest children are now embarking on their own Poland trips—I needed to understand what they would see so that we can share this most intense experience.

Ariane Schneider lives with her husband, Mark, and their four children in Sydney, Australia. She is passionately involved in her local Jewish community, serving in many and varied voluntary positions.



Ariane Schneider, from Australia, participated in the OU's recent mission to Poland. Courtesy of Ariane Schneider



Mission participants sit on the front steps of Yeshivas Chochmei Lublin.



Mark Hess (right), a mission participant, leads the *Kel Maleh* prayer at a mass grave of those who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto in the Okopawa Street Cemetery.

While neither my husband, Mark, nor I lost any of our immediate family during the Holocaust, it is *our* personal history. We choose to allow the experience and legacy of the Holocaust to be ours—not to define us but to be a part of us so that we can bear witness to the atrocity, and learn from it.

There was yet another reason deep within my soul for visiting Poland—to answer the questions that have been at the edge of my consciousness ever since, as a young girl, I learned of our recent history. Would I have seen the horrors coming? Would I have had the strength to leave? Would I have survived the ghetto? Would I have been able to give my children up in the hope that they would be safe, or would I have condemned them to my fate, whatever that may have been,



Mission participants and members of an Israeli teen group listen to a survivor of Birkenau share her story.

by keeping them by my side? Would I have shared my rations? Stood up to the *kapo*? Gone quietly to my fate? Fought back? Hid in the forest? Tried to escape? Would I have been angry with God? Would I still believe? Am I the person I think I am?

The lessons learned during our mission are many and life changing. No picture or book can convey what actually happened in Poland. Not until one stands in Birkenau, looks left and right and observes the land filled, as far as the eye can see, with the bunkers that held our brethren captive, can he begin to appreciate the enormity of the Holocaust—six million people, countless communities, entire families, great houses of learning, rabbis and leaders and potentially our future.

Poland is a cemetery. Each and every step we took, we stood upon the graves of our lost ones. As one does not live in a cemetery, I no longer believe that Jews should live in Poland. But Poland should not be *Judenfrei* either, for this would be a fulfillment of Hitler's dream. Both for the benefit of the living and the dead we must visit this vast gravesite. Footsteps of Jews should once again be heard crossing this land as we remember, honor and learn.

As so often happens in Judaism, our lows become our highs; standing in the gas chamber at Auschwitz, surrounded by the solid cement walls stained blue by the Zyklon-B and marred by the

scratches of the condemned, our hearts broken and our souls in pain, we began to sing Ani Ma'amim as many of those who walked this path to their deaths had done. Our voices faltered as we feebly tried to fill the death chamber with hope and faith. From behind us, out of the darkness, more voices joined with ours and the blue and white of the Israeli flag, carried and worn by a group of Israeli youth, came into view. Our voices intertwined and rose, and we sang with strength, conviction and faith.

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In that chamber we saw both our terrible past and our glorious future. Like Rabbi Akiva laughing as he observed foxes frolicking on the ruins of the *Beit Hamikdash*, for he could see the fulfillment of the prophecy of destruction, we cried tears of joy as those Israeli youth signified the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Redemption.

In Poland, one lesson that became abundantly clear is that the Jewish people's sojourn in a foreign land, while perhaps long and comfortable, is always temporary. If nothing else, let us learn never to be complacent

and to take nothing for granted. We must be the masters of our own destiny. God has given us the State of Israel. This is our inheritance, our home and our future!

No one comes away from such a trip unchanged. OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Steven Weil, who led the mission, urged us to use this trip as a catalyst for good on both a personal and communal level. He encouraged us to take on a mitzvah in memory of those lost, for if these souls could maintain their faith amidst the horror, as many of them did, then what excuse do we have? We must, insisted Rabbi Weil, take the passion and zeal inspired by our journey and put it back into our communities.

Did my trip to Poland answer my questions and confirm that I am the person I hope I am? It would be audacious of me to attempt to make claims as to how I would have reacted had I lived during those years of terror. Those of us who were not there can never really understand the experience of those who were, but I am not the same person who embarked with trepidation and anticipation on this trip.

I feel changed in my very essence—more aware, more connected, more determined, more sure of our future as a people. Those who perished were my family and I am their legacy. I will remember them, and I will endeavor to make a difference. *Am Yisrael Chai!* ■



1. OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Steven Weil gives a *shiur* in the *beit midrash* of the Yeshivas Chochmei Lublin.

2. Rabbi Mordechai Smolarcik, the rabbi of Boca Raton Synagogue West in Florida and a former NCSY regional director, shares a story with the group inside Krakow's ornately decorated Isaak Synagogue. Courtesy of Stephen J. Savitsky

3. Rabbi Weil addresses mission participants at the gravesite of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, founder of the Brisk rabbinic dynasty. Courtesy of David Horwatt

4. Sign at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp.

5. Rabbi Dr. Gilbert Klaperman, OU President Stephen J. Savitsky, Harry Weiss and Rabbi Weil converse at Birkenau.